

Democracy and Military Bases in Kyrgyzstan

Lincoln A. Mitchell

November 9, 2011

The election of Almaz Atanbaev as president of Kyrgyzstan in what has been recognized by western observer groups and governments as a relatively free election has been generally viewed as a sign that democracy may have a future in Kyrgyzstan. Atanbaev's election also provides another example of how the spread of democracy and the short term goals of the U.S. are often in conflict.

Within days of winning the election with 63 percent of the vote beating his closest rival, Adukhan Madumarov, by a margin of more than four to one, Atanbaev announced that he would soon begin to phase out the U.S. use of the air force base at Manas. This base, located only a few kilometers from downtown Bishkek plays a central role in bringing supplies and troops to Afghanistan. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how the U.S. effort in Afghanistan could succeed, or even continue, without access to the Manas base.

In summer of 2009, a previous Kyrgyz president, Kurmanbek Bakiev, also sought to end U.S. use of Manas. Bakiev, a deeply corrupt leader, was essentially trying to shake down the U.S. for more money as he was threatening to turn the base over to Russia because Russia had made a better offer. Ultimately, with few good options open, the U.S. acceded to Bakiev's shakedown and renegotiated their lease on Manas to the tune of \$60 million per year which represented a substantial increase from the existing lease which had been for \$17 million per year.

The situation today is different. Atanbaev's position does not appear to be a case of simply trying to line his pockets with more American money, but has expressed his view based on his country's geographical and strategic proximity to Russia and a fear that having a U.S. air force base just outside of his country's capital could create security concerns for Kyrgyzstan. While this position is not what the U.S. wants to hear, it is also reasonable and can plausibly said to be representing the interests of the Kyrgyz people.

The U.S. is in a difficult, but not impossible, position of having to find a way to, at least in the short term, to continue access to Manas while avoiding undermining the vulnerable democratic aspirations and expressions of the Kyrgyz people which Atanbaev represents. The U.S. must work with Atanbaev respectfully, avoiding threats and avoiding overpaying for access. Of course, if the Obama administration is serious about winding down the war in Afghanistan this task will be easier. A solution that allows both sides to claim some kind of victory, through a timeline or other similar commitments, and which offers some assistance to Kyrgyzstan is a plausible outcome to this conundrum.

The significance of this issue goes well beyond Kyrgyzstan because it is likely that in the next months and years there will be more newly elected governments, largely in the Middle East and North Africa that upon taking office will want to reframe their foreign policy and their relationship with the U.S. Manas will not be the only base that will be endangered and the U.S.

effort in Afghanistan will not be the only military goal that is threatened by the outcomes of these elections.

This dynamic has been a central tension of U.S. democracy assistance for much of the last decade, but it has become more significant following the Arab Spring. Free elections, particularly in Muslim countries, often lead to governments that are less supportive of the U.S. and its foreign policy. If the U.S. resolves this dilemma in Kyrgyzstan without resorting to threats or conceding too much money, it will be a good sign, but if the U.S. cannot work with Atanbaev in Kyrgyzstan, prospects for resolving similar problems in North Africa will not be good.